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Verdi's First "Willow Song": New Sketches and Drafts for *Otello*

LINDA B. FAIRTILE

The genesis of Verdi's *Otello* is a familiar episode in the history of Italian opera. The semiretired composer's reluctance to reenter the operatic fray, his gradual interest in Arrigo Boito's draft libretto, and the astonishing speed with which he composed the music have been the subject of both musicological and biographical study.¹ Letters between librettist and composer detail the textual modifications that Boito made to accommodate Verdi's needs. Up until now, however, we have had few corresponding musi-

cal documents readily available to illustrate how Verdi grappled with the challenges of Boito's libretto. Beginning with his draft text, dispatched to Verdi in sections during the first weeks of November 1879, Boito was always willing to make changes to suit the composer's needs. For the next seven years, through face-to-face meetings, correspondence, and the occasional intervention of publisher Giulio Ricordi, Boito and Verdi continued to refine the *Otello* libretto, even after formal musical composition had begun.

A letter from Boito to Verdi establishes that the two met on 13 September 1885 to modify the libretto of *Otello*'s fourth and final act. Among the agreed-on changes was a new text for Desdemona's "Willow Song," which was now to begin with the line "Piangea cantando nell'erma landa."² Although two versions of

19th-Century Music XIX/3 (Spring 1996). © by The Regents of the University of California.

I am grateful to James Hepokoski for comments and suggestions made throughout the preparation of this article, as well as to David Fenton for his critical insight.

¹The most detailed account of the opera's creation can be found in James Hepokoski, *Giuseppe Verdi: Otello* (Cambridge, 1987). A broader contextual background is presented in chapters 31 and 32 of Mary Jane Phillips-Matz, *Verdi: A Biography* (Oxford, 1993).

²Hepokoski, *Otello*, p. 41.

Boito's original text, "Sotto ad un salice," are preserved in his autograph libretto at Verdi's Sant'Agata estate,³ scholars have previously been unable to determine why Verdi rejected this earlier text, or even whether he had ever attempted to set it to music.

A newly discovered series of photographs in the Toscanini Legacy, a collection in the Music Division of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (henceforth abbreviated NYPL), however, reveals that Verdi did indeed draft a setting of "Sotto ad un salice" before asking his librettist for a new text. In addition to transmitting sketches and drafts of the opera's fourth act through the end of the "Ave Maria"—with "Sotto ad un salice" in the place of "Piangea cantando"—these nineteen photographs also contain sketches for the opera's act I *Brindisi*, "Inaffia l'ugola."

It is well known that documentary evidence of Verdi's compositional process has been relatively scarce.⁴ And, indeed, previously available sketches and drafts for *Otello* are few: a one-page sketch from the act II Quartet at Paris's Bibliothèque de l'Opéra; a single draft page from *Otello*'s act III confrontation with Desdemona (reproduced in Gatti's *Verdi nelle immagini*); and a two-page draft of the act III Trio at the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York (facsimile in Martin Chusid's *Catalog of Verdi's Operas*).⁵ The nineteen NYPL photographs, therefore, represent the largest publicly accessible group of preliminary materials for *Otello*.

The current location of the photographs'

manuscript source is unknown.⁶ The NYPL obtained the photographs in 1987, as part of an enormous collection of musical scores, personal papers, sound recordings, books, and iconography acquired from the heirs of Arturo Toscanini. No source for the photographs appears on the original handwritten inventory of the collection. Although these photographs were known to a few NYPL staff members, their significance had escaped notice until I encountered them in July 1994 while cataloging materials in the Toscanini Legacy.

The whereabouts of the original manuscript is verifiable only through 24 June 1924. On that date, according to a signed inscription at the top of the first page, the composer's niece and heir, Maria Carrara Verdi, gave "this autograph of Giuseppe Verdi" to the impresario Giulio Gatti-Casazza.⁷ How Toscanini subsequently acquired photographs of the manuscript is unclear. It is possible that Gatti-Casazza, his friend and general manager at both La Scala (1898–1908) and the Metropolitan Opera (1908–35), had the copies made for him. When Gatti-Casazza first received the sketches from Maria Carrara Verdi, he and Toscanini were in the midst of a bitter feud that had reportedly erupted over the conductor's 1915 resignation from the Metropolitan Opera.⁸ Because the two men did not reconcile until 1932, it is unlikely that Toscanini would have obtained the photographs before that time.

The NYPL photographs measure 12 inches wide by 8.5 inches high and depict machine-ruled, twelve-staff oblong paper. All four edges of each page are visible. Photographs 1–10 reveal a partial Lard-Esnault blind stamp near the upper edge—indicating Verdi's usual source of paper—while 11–19 carry no such marking. They are bound by a thin blue ribbon in a brown paper folder on which Toscanini wrote

³Microfilm copies of Boito's holograph librettos for both *Otello* and *Falstaff* are available for consultation at New York University's American Institute for Verdi Studies.

⁴The three main sources of information about Verdi's compositional sketches and drafts are Martin Chusid, *A Catalog of Verdi's Operas* (Hackensack, N.J., 1974), which contains information on the location and publication of materials for *Aida*, *Attila*, *Un ballo in maschera*, *Don Carlos*, *I due Foscari*, *I Lombardi*, *Otello*, *Rigoletto*, *La traviata*, *Il trovatore*, and *Les vèpres siciliennes*; and Carlo Gatti, *L'abbozzo del 'Rigoletto' di Giuseppe Verdi and Verdi nelle immagini* (Milan, 1941), which publish facsimiles of some of the sketches still housed at Sant'Agata.

⁵Hepokoski discusses each of these manuscripts in *Otello*, pp. 53–58.

⁶On 1 December 1995, Sotheby's of London offered the manuscript for sale at auction. In advance of the auction, Sotheby's issued a small catalog that features four facsimile pages of the manuscript, corresponding to NYPL photographs 3, 8, 11, and 17. No details of the sale were released.

⁷"All'Ing. Gatti Casazza questo autografo di Giuseppe Verdi offre Maria Carrara Verdi. 24.6.24 S. Agata."

⁸"Toscanini and Gatti-Casazza End Long Quarrel," *New York Times*, 30 April 1932, p. 17.

Table 1
Inventory of the New York Public Library photographs

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Verdi's First
"Willow Song"

No.	Mm.	CONTENTS
1-10	277	Continuity draft: act IV, scs. 1-2, including "Sotto ad un salice" PV: act IV, opening through [U]
11	28	Draft: part of "Ave Maria" (later version) PV: act IV, [R] through [U]
12	18	Draft: part of scene preceding "Sotto ad un salice" PV: act IV, 5 mm. after [C] through 6 mm. after [D]
13	18	Sketches: act I <i>Brindisi</i> PV: act I, 18 mm. before [EE] and around [LL]
14	23	Sketches: <i>Brindisi</i> [?] PV: no equivalent
15-16	63	Sketches: "Sotto ad un salice" PV: no equivalent
17	25	Sketch: <i>Brindisi</i> PV: act I, 8 mm. before [EE] through 11 mm. before [FF]
18	19	Sketches: <i>Brindisi</i> and act III Trio [?] PV: no equivalent
19	15	Sketches: <i>Brindisi</i> PV: act I, 7 mm. around [GG]

Note: PV = equivalent passage in current Ricordi piano-vocal score.

"Prima stesura del 'Salce' nell'opera *Otello*" (first draft of "Willow" in the opera *Otello*) in red ink. The quality of the photographed images is excellent, permitting the identification of multiple layers of manuscript.

Table 1 provides an inventory of the NYPL photographs. The sequence begins with the longest continuous musical passages rather than trying to reflect strictly chronological, progressive stages of development or even keeping related materials together. Indeed, the order of the photographs cannot possibly agree with the pagination of their source. Photographs 1, 3, 5, 7, and 9 transmit recto leaves, as indicated by the image of a partial Lard-Esnault blind stamp in the upper left corner and fingerprint smudges in the lower right margin. Reversed markings

in the margins of the pages reproduced in photographs 2, 4, 6, 8, and 10 suggest that they are the corresponding verso sides. According to the established pattern, photograph 11 should be a recto leaf, but a clearly visible opening along its right margin distinguishes it as a verso. Since photographs 1-10 transmit the continuity draft of act IV, scs. 1 and 2, and since photograph 11 contains a later version of the "Ave Maria," it is possible that the missing recto actually appears later in the series.⁹

⁹I was permitted to examine the manuscript in advance of its December 1995 sale and was thus able to see that my assumption was correct. Since the leaf corresponding to photograph 10 appears at the very end of the manuscript, photograph 11's image is actually the verso of photograph 9's.

For the most part, the *Otello* sketches and drafts are laid out in a two-staff system for strictly instrumental passages and a three-staff when vocal parts are required; a blank staff usually separates the systems. Verdi placed clefs, including the soprano clef for Desdemona and Emilia and the tenor clef for Cassio, at the beginnings of most excerpts, but following that, his notation of clefs, key signatures, and accidentals is minimal, reflecting his own needs. Photographs 1, 7, 8, and 9 contain crossed-out and rewritten measures, and most pages also include evidence of pitch, rhythm, and text changes. In addition, photographs 3 through 8 bear Toscanini's penciled notations, which fleshed out Verdi's often meager instrumental accompaniment for "Sotto ad un salice."¹⁰

The special allure of preliminary compositional materials for *Otello* stems from their status as Verdi's first new operatic effort after over a decade of semiretirement. He probably began to sketch ideas for the music of *Otello* in late 1882. At this time, his former pupil, Emanuele Muzio, reported seeing fragments of the opera on Verdi's piano.¹¹ Giulio Ricordi, who as Verdi's publisher had been privileged to witness the composer at work on several occasions, once described his method:

Verdi writes very few sketches during the period of composition: only simple reminders, indications of musical impulses, and nothing more. Verdi conceives the opera while reading the libretto. The composer plans the first general outlines of his own work by reciting the lines. In so doing, he studies the inflections of his voice, the various colors that the words assume in the sentiments of wrath, pity, and love. The great maestro has always done it in this way.¹²

¹⁰Although he was the second-desk cellist at the premiere performance of *Otello* in 1887, Arturo Toscanini's personal association with Verdi at that time was confined to a single encounter in which the composer accused him of playing too softly during the opening of the act I duet [see Harvey Sachs, *Toscanini* (London, 1978), p. 26]. It is unlikely that Toscanini and Verdi ever discussed "Sotto ad un salice." The conductor's annotations, therefore, probably reflect his own conception of the piece.

¹¹Letter to Giulio Ricordi, 29 December 1882, in Franco Abbiati, *Giuseppe Verdi*, vol. IV (Milan, 1959), p. 206.

¹²Giulio Ricordi, "How Giuseppe Verdi Writes and Rehearses," trans. Hepokoski as an appendix to "Under the Eye of the Verdian Bear: Notes on the Rehearsals and Premiere of *Falstaff*," in *Musical Quarterly* 71 (1985), 150.

As we will see, evidence from the NYPL photographs permits us to refine Ricordi's account of Verdi's working method. In the opening scene of act IV, seemingly routine details such as text setting in recitative passages appear to have cost Verdi considerable effort. In the case of "Sotto ad un salice," however, he sketched out only two pages of melodic fragments before progressing to a continuity draft consisting of bass line, vocal melody, and significant instrumental material. Ricordi was correct about a crucial aspect of Verdi's compositional process: to judge from this new material, he does seem to have progressed directly from fragmentary sketches to complex, extended drafts. Still, the use of conventional operatic formulas early in his career and close collaboration with his librettists in later years may have expedited the creation of musical structures. His rapid progress in preparing the continuity draft of *Otello*—four acts in approximately nine months—is a testament to his compositional facility, aided by years of sketching, planning, and simply living with the libretto.

ACT IV: THE OPENING SCENA

The first ten NYPL photographs present a continuity draft of act IV through the end of the "Ave Maria." With the supplementary photographs 11–12 (drafts) and 15–16 (sketches), they chronicle the genesis of nearly half of *Otello*'s final act. Since Verdi completely rewrote the opening piece, substantially changing its emotional tone, it is surprising that in the published version he retained so much of the material originally preceding the "Willow Song." Particularly noteworthy is a large block of *scena* material that leads to the song's instrumental ritornello: these important twenty-five measures, left virtually unchanged in the published version, begin with the lines "Senti. Se pria di te morir dovessi." This passage consists largely of an arioso texture, beginning in B \flat minor, and it appears to have influenced the composition of the revised, multithemed instrumental prelude that introduces the act as a whole. In any event, since this twenty-five-measure block is the longest passage of the original draft that Verdi retained, we may presume that he considered it musically and dramatically appropri-

ate, regardless of which of the two very different "Willow Songs" it preceded.

The continuity draft begins with a simple sixteen-measure lament for two clarinets that grows out of a hollow c#-g# fifth. Although he later removed the attendant f* grace notes (reminiscent of the recently revised *Don Carlos*), Verdi retained the open fifths, as well as the unexpected turn to G major, in the published version. While the definitive prelude is a thirty-three-measure structure in a highly chromatic C# minor, its briefer predecessor is more firmly anchored in F# minor, with the initial c#-g# fifths serving as a dominant preparation rather than an assertion of the tonic.¹³

Both versions of act IV, sc. 1, are dominated by Desdemona's thoughts about herself and her marriage. Over the course of the opera's first three acts, her relationship with Otello had deteriorated from a tender love duet to public humiliation and even violence. A despairing phrase from the act III concertato eloquently conveys her current inner state: "M'agghiaccia il brivido dell'anima che muor" (I am chilled by the shiver of my dying soul). It is doubtless her moribund spirit that is evoked by the hollow c#-g# fifths in both versions of act IV. The original prelude maintains the bleak timbre of its two clarinets as they rise briefly into their middle registers, pausing on a G-major, "Neapolitan" chord in the ninth and tenth measures, only to sink back inexorably into F# minor. This tone of lonely resignation matches Desdemona's disposition throughout the scene.

On the other hand, the longer, definitive act IV prelude is musically and psychologically more complex, as it draws additional resources from two lines of text in the following scene. The first, Desdemona's observation that a song from her childhood is fixed in her memory ("Io questa sera ho la memoria piena di quella cantilena"), leads to a brief fantasy on the recollected melody of "Piangea cantando." The

published version of the prelude (mm. 23–25) also incorporates a truncated anticipation of the musical phrase (mm. 39–42 of the scene) in which she will later ask Emilia to lay out her wedding clothes, a valedictory glimpse back to a happier time. As in the draft prelude, however, the clarinet fifths occur repeatedly in the published version, intruding on positive memories like an ever-present manifestation of Desdemona's dying soul.¹⁴

In both the draft and published versions, the prelude gives way to a *scena* between Desdemona and Emilia. Verdi considered at least three different ways of setting Desdemona's first utterance, "Mi pareo. M'ingiunse di coricarmi ed attenderlo" (He seemed so. He commanded me to go to bed and wait for him), notating each attempt on the same staff (ex. 1). Crossed-out and reinforced note heads suggest that his initial effort hovered between a¹ and f#¹. He apparently replaced this with another setting centered on e#¹, while a third alternative substitutes f#¹s for some of the original layer's a¹s. The final version of this phrase resembles a compromise, reproducing the drooping contour that opens the revised melody while retaining the original's higher tessitura.

Rhythms in the draft of the opening recitative are sometimes less flexible than those in the published version. There is a greater reliance on agogic stress in the earlier rendition, exemplified by the long-short-short patterns that Verdi later replaced with triplets. The phrase "Emilia, te ne prego, distendi sul mio letto la mia candida veste nuziale" (Emilia, I ask you, spread out on the bed my white wedding gown) has multiple settings in the continuity draft (transcribed on two staves instead of Verdi's single staff). Each depicts the verbal image of "spreading" through the use of elongated note values. In the final version, Verdi transferred this metaphor from a rhythmic to a melodic plane, devising an arching theme that consists

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¹³Noting the discrepancy in tonalities between the final version's prelude and "Willow Song," Julian Budden remarked that the English horn, assigned the prelude's opening motive, "could not play it effectively" in F# minor. This observation suggests that Verdi's choice of instrumental color overruled any notion of tonal consistency. Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, vol. III (Oxford, 1981, rev. 1992), p. 389.

¹⁴An alternative to Budden's explanation for the divergent tonalities of the definitive prelude and "Willow Song" considers the powerful negative energy of Desdemona's depression. Despite a partial quotation of the "Willow Song," it is the lifelessness of her soul, as depicted by the clarinets' fifths, that permeates the prelude. Since the A clarinet's lowest and hollowest note is C# (concert pitch), it, rather than F#, must be the tonic.

Example 1: Photograph 1.

of a series of eighth notes (beginning two measures after [C] in the published version). He also achieved a more natural setting of the text in the final version by occasionally changing patterns of even eighth notes into dotted eighth/sixteenth note figures, for example, at “ed attenderlo” (one measure before [C]) and “innamorata e bella” (two to three measures after [D]).

At m. 27 of the draft, Verdi shifted to a five-flat signature—B♭ minor—and to an arioso texture for Desdemona’s “Senti. Se pria di te morir dovessi mi seppellisci con un di quei veli” (Listen. If I should die before you, bury me with one of those veils). As mentioned earlier, this is the important passage that was retained, largely unchanged, in the definitive act IV. Its text concerns the central images in Desdemona’s mind: past happiness (embodied by a reference to her wedding veil), her present overwhelming sadness (expressed by the clarinets’ open fifths), and a distant recollection of a servant’s song. In the draft version of the scene, only the arioso juxtaposes these three elements in a single musical passage. In the definitive score, however, Verdi’s newly composed instrumental prelude draws on the same three components in a different order (sadness, song, past happiness). In the published version, then, the arioso subsequently represents a texted fulfillment of the orchestral premonition. It is possible that the opportunity for such a relationship was what motivated Verdi to recompose the prelude.

NYPL photographs 2 and 12 document two different draft versions of the vocal lines for Desdemona’s arioso, “Senti. Se pria di te morir dovessi.” Both versions begin with m. 26 and contain similar material, but only photograph

2’s last syllable, “can-,” links with photograph 3’s “-zone.” Photograph 12’s text concludes with “cantava una,” implying that Verdi rejected this page before starting over with the pages represented in photographs 2 and 3. Photograph 12, therefore, contains the earlier version.

Differences between the versions preserved in photographs 12 and 2 are slight, but it may have been his changes in the layout of Desdemona’s vocal lines that motivated Verdi to recopy the page. In photograph 12, her “Senti” occurs on the third beat of m. 27, whereas in photograph 2 it is delayed until the downbeat of m. 28. In both drafts, the word “pria” falls on the third beat of m. 28; Verdi may have felt that the first reading admitted too much space between “Senti” and the start of the next sentence. Similarly, at the resumption of recitative texture in m. 37, Desdemona’s “Mia madre aveva una povera ancella” (My mother had a poor maid) begins one and one half beats after the clarinets’ final note in photograph 12 and a full beat earlier in photograph 2. The pacing of this text is different in each draft (ex. 2). The first lingers for two beats on the word “madre” and compresses “aveva una povera ancella” into three beats, and the later draft limits “madre” to one beat and devotes five to the remainder of the text phrase. The result emphasizes the maid, Barbara, rather than Desdemona’s mother.

In addition, there are also discrepancies between the draft and published versions of Desdemona’s arioso, “Senti. Se pria di te morir dovessi.” Two changes in the vocal line may be directly related to the substitution of the second “Willow Song.” An ornamental turn in m. 30 of the draft appears to foreshadow the lightly embellished melody of the rejected “Sotto ad

a. Photograph 12

37

b. Photograph 2

37

Example 2

un salice"; consequently, it does not appear in the final version. In the following measures, Verdi replaced the draft's setting of "mi seppelisci con un di quei veli" with a direct quotation from "Piangea cantando" ("Povera Barbara," at [L]), designed to link Desdemona's fate with that of her mother's maid, Barbara.

The published version's opening scene exhibits a harmonic richness not found in the continuity draft. Just as Desdemona's picturesque vocal setting of "distendi sul mio letto" is simple recitative in the draft, so the exquisite *fauxbourdon* underscoring her plea was originally a mere $\frac{5}{3}-\frac{6}{4}$ decoration of the dominant. In the arioso section, the original melody of Desdemona's "mi seppelisci con un di quei veli" receives a slightly less distinctive harmonic treatment in photograph 2 than in photograph 12's earlier setting. While both draft versions of this passage depict a harmonic motion from III to i—D \flat major to B \flat minor—the definitive setting instead emphasizes the "Neapolitan" (C \flat -major) triad before settling on the tonic. It is possible that Verdi salvaged this Neapolitan-tonic relationship from mm. 9–12 of the discarded prelude.

Although the accompaniment staves in Verdi's drafts generally lack dynamics, articulations, and other expressive markings, photographs 2 and 3 contain some unconventional indications that do not survive in the published version. In mm. 27–30 (beginning just before "Senti. Se pria di te morir dovessi"), the bass line's first five quarter notes, all unaccented, are slurred together so that the ensuing four-note phrases conclude with the following measure's downbeat, complementing the syncopation above. By contrast, the published full score's quarter notes are consistently grouped in pairs, with a strong accent on the second and fourth beats of each measure, thus achieving a sense of metric ambiguity through different means. Verdi also transformed the many decrescendo indications in mm. 47–50 of the draft, which culminate in an extraordinary *pppppppp*, into the final version's dynamic ebb and flow. Verdi usually postponed decisions about details of articulation and dynamics to the orchestration phase of composition. The *pppppppp* notation, therefore, may have served as a reminder that he wanted this passage performed as softly as possible.

"SOTTO AD UN SALICE":
BOITO'S TEXT AND ITS SOURCES

Photographs 3 through 7 transmit Verdi's setting of Desdemona's original "Willow Song," "Sotto ad un salice." In order to consider why he later rejected this virtually complete musical number, we must first explore the background and complex evolution of Boito's text (Table 2 lists the various textual versions). After identifying the inherent problem in Boito's first draft of "Sotto ad un salice" (text 1a in Table 2), as well as examining his ill-fated attempts to repair it (texts 1b and 1c), we shall see that even Verdi's skill could not accommodate such an unusual text.

Despite their resemblances, the content of Boito's "Sotto ad un salice" probably owes less to Shakespeare's Willow Song than to another source. James Hepokoski has established that Boito, working from François-Victor Hugo's French translation of *Othello*, fashioned the text of "Piangea cantando" from a portion of an anonymous English ballad—sung by a man rather than a woman—that Hugo had offered in a footnote as Shakespeare's own source.¹⁵ Hepokoski based his claim on the fact that Hugo's footnote reproduced, in French translation, only four of the English ballad's twenty-three stanzas, and Boito's "Piangea cantando" addressed only the subject matter contained in this fragmentary citation.

Significant for the text of "Sotto ad un salice" is Hepokoski's identification of bird imagery in both "Piangea cantando" ("Scendean l'augelli a vol dai rami cupi verso quel dolce canto" [the birds descended in flight from the dark branches toward that sweet song]) and the translated ballad fragment ("Les oiseaux muets se juchaient près de lui, apprivoisés par ses plaintes" [the mute birds perched near him, tamed by his tears]), an element that does not appear in Shakespeare's Willow Song. The avian allusion

in "Sotto ad un salice" is even closer to that of the ballad citation—again, human suffering tames and silences a bird—suggesting that this text too stems from its non-Shakespearean predecessor. Further, it is Hugo's rendition of the English ballad, and not Shakespeare's Willow Song, that contains the notion of juxtaposed destinies; Hugo's "Elle était née pour être belle, moi, pour mourir épris d'elle" (She was born to be beautiful, I, to die captivated by her) finds its parallel in the sole couplet shared by "Sotto ad un salice" and "Piangea cantando": "Egli era nato per la sua gloria / Io per amarlo e per morir" (He was born for his glory / I to love him and to die).

Although Boito based the content of "Sotto ad un salice" on Hugo's fragmentary translation of the English ballad, the structure of his text seems to have been modeled on Shakespeare's Willow Song. Both Boito and Shakespeare essentially began with a strophic song, adding interpolations that complicate its structure and dramatic function. At the heart of Boito's text are four quatrains that paint a picture of a lovelorn, forsaken woman. Like both of its sources, the original "Sotto ad un salice" text also includes a two-line refrain ("E in quell' [Mentre all'] alma . . ."), although in Boito's text it follows only the first and third quatrains, rather than all four:

Sotto ad un salice sedea la mesta
E senza speme languia d'amor,
Lenta chinava sul sen la testa,
Lenta la mano premea sul cor
E in quell'alma gemebonda
Salìa l'onda dell'dolor.

Reso fidente da tanto duolo
Senza l'usato canto l'augel
Moveva tacito tacito il volo
Dove piangeva quella fedel.

E la sua voce nella vallea
Quando più tetro moriva il dì
Come un languente suon si perdea
E la sua voce dicea così:
Mentre all'alma gemebonda
Salìa l'onda del dolor;

Ei m'abbandona; la sua memoria
Più non lo scuote nè i miei sospir.
Egli era nato per la sua gloria,
Io per amarlo e per morir.

¹⁵The complete ballad, titled "Willow, Willow, Willow," was published by Thomas Percy in *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765). Hepokoski reproduced Hugo's French translation of stanzas 1, 5, 6, and 7 in "Boito and F.-V. Hugo's 'Magnificent Translation': A Study in the Genesis of the *Otello* Libretto," in *Reading Opera*, ed. Arthur Groos and Roger Parker (Princeton, 1988), pp. 49–50.

Table 2
Text Versions of the "Willow Song"

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Verdi's First
"Willow Song"

- 1a. "Sotto ad un salice"—1st version, 1879 (holograph libretto)
- 1b. "Sotto ad un salice"—2nd version, 1879–85? (holograph libretto)
- 1c. "Sotto ad un salice"—corrections to 2nd version, 1879–85? (holograph libretto)
2. "Piangea cantando"—after 13 September 1885

(Under a willow sat the sad woman
And without hope she languished for love.
Slowly she bowed her head on her breast,
Slowly she pressed her hand to her heart
And in that moaning soul
Rose a wave of sadness.

Rendered trusting by such suffering,
Without its accustomed song, the bird
Moved silently, silently in flight
Where the faithful one wept.

And her voice in the valley,
When the day died into dusk,
Lost itself like a languishing sound
And thus her voice spoke:
While in that moaning soul
Rose a wave of sadness,

He is abandoning me; my memory
No longer stirs him, nor my sighs.
He was born for his glory,
I to love him and to die.¹⁶

In keeping with his predilection for unusual poetic meters, Boito constructed the refrain with *ottonario* (eight-syllable) verse, rather than the *doppio quinario* (two five-syllable phrases per line) established around it in the four quatrains.

Boito further complicated this textual structure by including interruptions—also present in the Shakespearean model—that are not part of the song itself. In the first version of "Sotto

ad un salice," these digressions affect the second, third, and fourth quatrains and consist of Desdemona's comments to Emilia, reflecting her preoccupations as she sings Barbara's song. The first interruption, "Riponi quest'anello" (Take this ring), originally occurred within the second quatrain, as Desdemona handed her ring to Emilia. It engendered a repetition of the previous line of song text ("Moveva tacito"), as if the momentary distraction had caused Desdemona to lose her place. All of the other interruptions fall between the stanzas of the song and indicate that Desdemona expects Otello's arrival at any minute.

Boito's punctuation in the first version of the song found in his holograph libretto seems intended as a guide through the text's complicated structure. Quotation marks surround every line of the four quatrains, while the interruptions appear without embellishment. In addition, each line of the refrain is preceded by the number "8," indicating that it is composed of *ottonario* lines rather than the prevailing *doppio quinario*.

The holograph libretto of *Otello* also contains a second, revised text for "Sotto ad un salice" that is almost identical to the version found in Verdi's setting in the NYPL photographs. The likely motivation for this revision is obvious: in Boito's original text, the recurring *ottonario* refrain is at odds with the context of its second appearance. Of the song's four quatrains, the first three are narrative, while the fourth is a first-person citation of the lovelorn woman's own words. This shift in perspective is prepared by the final line of the third quatrain, "E la sua voce dicea così:" (And thus her voice spoke:). When the third-person refrain appears after the first quatrain, it is in an appropriately narrative context. Placed after

¹⁶This transcription, in Italian, of Boito's first "Sotto ad un salice" text was originally published by Alessandro Luzio in *Carteggi verdiani*, vol. II (Rome, 1935), pp. 117–18. Although Luzio made only minor errors in transcribing the "Willow Song" proper—reading "teneae" as "premea" and substituting his own punctuation for Boito's—his location of interruptions in the song conflates the text's first and second versions. For this reason, the interruptions are not reproduced here.

the third quatrain, however, these same refrain lines separate "E la sua voce dicea così:" from the voice of the woman herself, thereby obscuring the source of the quotation. Although this ambiguity might have been desirable from a dramatic standpoint, permitting the fourth quatrain to be interpreted as Desdemona's own words, it nonetheless weakens the song's structural integrity.

The revised version of "Sotto ad un salice" (text 1b in Table 2) departs even further from the structure of Boito's models. Rather than fashioning a new refrain that could serve equally well in both contexts, Boito retained the first pair of *ottonario* lines and searched for something else to place after the third quatrain. By eliminating the repetition of the initial *ottonario* couplet, of course, Boito was rejecting the very concept of a textual refrain. His first attempt at a solution is represented by two new lines of *ottonario* text that appear after the third quatrain. Curiously, Boito used this new couplet to relate the lovelorn woman's death, before moving on to the final interruption ("Ascolta. Odo un lamento") and fourth quatrain. With such a radical alteration, this endeavor only exacerbated the original problem. The new couplet's third-person perspective and abrupt introduction of the woman's death rendered the surrounding lines of text incoherent.

After substituting these peculiarly morbid lines, Boito again revised "Sotto ad un salice" (text 1c in Table 2), this time drastically modifying his original plan. Dispensing altogether with the idea of an *ottonario* couplet after the third quatrain, he crossed out the new text and instead copied the fourth quatrain's opening couplet ("Ei m'abbandona")—with its *doppio quinario* verse meter—into the left margin. As a result, for the first time, "E la sua voce dicea così:" led directly to the woman's own words. Since Boito left both the ensuing interruption text and the entire fourth quatrain intact, he effectively joined the third and fourth quatrains into a single stanza with interruption and internal repetition:

[first two quatrains as above]
E la sua voce nella valle
Quando più tetro moriva il dì
Come un languente suon si perdea

E la sua voce dicea così:
Ei m'abbandona la sua memoria
Più non lo scuote nè i miei sospir
—Ascolta. Odo un lamento.
Taci. Chi batte a questa porta?
EMILIA: E' il vento.—

DES.: Ei m'abbandona la sua memoria¹⁷
Più non lo scuote nè i miei sospir . . .
Egli era nato per la sua gloria,
Io per amarlo e per morir.

With this revision of "Sotto ad un salice," Boito also regularized the position of the interruptions by moving the first one—"Riponi questo anello"—from the middle of the second quatrain to just before its beginning; he then removed the repeated line from the second quatrain. With the newly realized repeat of the fourth quatrain's opening couplet, similar repetition in the second quatrain may have struck Boito as excessive.

Although Boito changed only a few lines of text as he revised "Sotto ad un salice," the impact of these alterations is profound. While the song's first two quatrains preserve their original structure (except for the eliminated repetition in the second quatrain), the *ottonario* couplet is no longer repeated at a later point, and therefore it loses its identity as a textual refrain. Moreover, the substitution of the fourth quatrain's opening lines in place of the second refrain statement gives the third and fourth quatrains the appearance of a single, long stanza. What began as a four-strophe song with intermittent refrain (after stanzas one and three), then, metamorphosed into an essentially bipartite design with two dissimilarly structured halves. It is this text that Verdi set to music in the NYPL photos' continuity draft.

¹⁷In the holograph libretto, Boito appears to have erred in copying the final quatrain from the first version of the text to the second, creating two semantically equivalent phrases. While in version one the fourth quatrain refers to "my memory" (that is, "the memory of me"), version two's fourth quatrain instead invokes "his memory." Complicating matters further, the *doppio quinario* couplet that occupies the "refrain space" in version two reverts to "my memory." In setting the second version of the text to music, Verdi consistently employed the masculine pronoun.

a. Photograph 3

51

59

Sot-to ad un sa-li-ce se-dea la me-sta

Flauti

oboe

Example 3

"SOTTO AD UN SALICE": VERDI'S SETTING

Verdi's musical setting of "Sotto ad un salice" only partially succeeds in concealing the hybrid nature of its text. As we will see, although he essentially composed a two-strophe song with no real textual refrain, the compulsory repetition of text within its second stanza presented him with a dilemma whose resolution gravely undermined the song's musical form. Verdi's subsequent acceptance of "Piangea cantando," a multistrophic song with an unmistakable refrain, suggests that he had always favored a structure of this type for the "Willow Song"; indeed, this was precisely the form that Boito had attempted and failed to create in the original version of "Sotto ad un salice."

Following the large-scale formal implications of Boito's revised text, Verdi set "Sotto ad un salice" in two strophes, each built from paired phrases.¹⁸ An instrumental ritornello in F# major precedes each strophe, and some manifesta-

tion of it—usually a minor-mode abbreviation—accompanies each of Desdemona's real-time remarks to Emilia. The ritornello thus functions as a dramatic passageway between Desdemona's reality and the narrative world of the "Willow Song."

The tonal design of Verdi's two strophes reflects formal delineations within the text. The first two paired phrases (ex. 3a and b), setting Boito's initial quatrain, shift gradually away from the opening F#-minor sonority, through C# minor (the minor dominant), to a half cadence on G# major (V of C#). Verdi then moved unexpectedly to B major (the major subdominant) for the two *ottonario* lines ("E in quell'alma . . .") that follow the first quatrain. Although the second quatrain's initial phrase pair ("Reso fidente") begins with a B-major sonority, both phrase pairs are actually grounded in a modally unsteady F#, thereby closing the first strophe with an equivocal return to the tonic (ex. 3b and c).

Complicating matters slightly, the first strophe's final phrase pair ("Movea tacito"¹⁹) seems to take on certain elements of a musical

¹⁸According to Hepokoski ("Ottocento Opera as Cultural Drama: Generic Mixtures in *Il trovatore*" in *The Mature Verdi: Source Studies, Analysis and Performance Practice* (1849–59), University of Chicago Press, forthcoming), the use of paired phrases is a standard "French/strophic" procedure.

¹⁹In his musical setting of "Sotto ad un salice," Verdi consistently substituted "movea" for Boito's "moveva." The two words are grammatically and semantically equivalent.

b. Photograph 4

65

PPP

e sen - za spe - me lan - gua d'a - mor. Len - ta chi - na - va sul sen la tes - ta,

fagot

Archi

73

con espr.

len - ta la ma - no po - sava sul cor E in quell' al - ma ge - me bon - da sa - lia

82

ten.

l'on - da del do - lor - - Ri - po - ne quest' an - nel - lo.

90

Re - so fi - den - te - da tan - to duo - lo sen - za l'u - sa - to can - to l'au - gel -

[sic]

Example 3 (continued)

refrain (though not a textual one), by virtue of its location, its expansiveness, and its appropriation of material from the repeated instrumental ritornello. In a sense, by giving superficial refrainlike characteristics to the first strophe's final phrases, as well as to the conclusion of the second strophe, Verdi created for

himself the musical structure that Boito's revised text had denied him.

Two additional pages of sketches for these refrainlike passages are found in the NYPL photos (see table 3). Photographs 15 and 16 contain significantly different vocal lines for the phrase pair that concludes the first strophe ("Movea

c. Photograph 5

LINDA B.
FAIRTILE
Verdi's First
"Willow Song"

The musical score is presented in three systems. The first system shows a vocal line with a melodic fragment. The second system, starting at measure 99, includes vocal and piano accompaniment. The vocal line has the lyrics: "Mo - ve - va ta - ci - to, ta - ci - to il vo - lo Do -". The piano part features arpeggiated figures. The third system, starting at measure 108, continues the vocal and piano parts. The vocal line has the lyrics: "ve pian - ge - va do - ve pian - ge - va quel - la - fe - del." with a *pp* dynamic and a *mor[endo]* marking. The piano part has a *f* dynamic. The fourth system, starting at measure 117, shows the vocal line with the lyrics: "Af - fret - ta - ti fra po - co giunge O - tel - lo" and a "[rhythm unclear]" marking. The piano part continues with arpeggiated figures.

Example 3 (*continued*)

tacito"). Clearly, Verdi labored over the melody for this crucial location. Both photographs 15 and 16 transmit conventionally "operatic" settings, featuring high notes and falling arpeggios that are inconsistent with the simple, understated vocal writing of "Sotto ad un salice." Although the contrast is extreme, these sketches demonstrate that Verdi had always envisioned the concluding phrase pairs as different in character from the rest of the song.²⁰

²⁰That photograph 16 transmits different sketches for the conclusions of the first and second strophes ("Movea tacito"

His eventual solution of borrowing from the instrumental ritornello for the phrases that end each strophe is an effective means of distinguishing the pseudo-refrains from the rest of the "Willow Song" proper while also providing a sense of musical closure.

and "Egli era nato") seems to suggest that Verdi had not always planned to use identical melodic material in both instances. His sketch for the second strophe's conclusion, however, resembles a fragment notated above the first strophe's conclusion in the continuity draft (mm. 99–107 of ex. 3). Clearly, Verdi's plan for a musical connection between these two couplets originated at an early stage of composition.

a. mm. 143–51

143

b. mm. 161–69

161 Bisbigliando

Example 4: Photograph 6

The unorthodox structure of the second large stanza in “Sotto ad un salice” presented a formidable challenge that probably led to Verdi’s rejection of the text as a whole. The beginning of the second strophe is comparable to the first. It must be noted, however, that its second phrase pair (“Come un languente suon”) is a melodic variation of its strophe one counterpart (“Lenta chinava sul sen”); in addition, strophe two’s phrases close on B major (the subdominant) rather than the G \sharp major (V of the dominant) of strophe one. The third quatrain’s text may account for this dissimilarity, since the phrase in question contains the crucial line, “E la sua voce dicea così:”—the preparation for the first-person quotation of the lovelorn woman.

After the second phrase pair (“Come un languente suon . . .” at mm. 135–42), Verdi’s established musical structure is challenged by the complexity of Boito’s text. The appearance of fourth-quatrain material (“Ei m’abbandona . . .”) in two different locations in the text left Verdi with two alternatives: either set the repeated couplet to different music for each of its appearances or give it the same musical setting

in two different contexts. If Verdi had chosen the former option, he would have been able to preserve formal symmetry between his two strophes. This musical advantage, however, would have come at the expense of dramatic logic, since Desdemona would have “remembered” the same line of text from Barbara’s song (“Ei m’abbandona”) with two different melodies.

Instead, Verdi elected to assign the same melody to both appearances of the “Ei m’abbandona” couplet (ex. 4). As a result, the musical structure of the second strophe (ABCCE) contrasts with that of the first (ABCDE). The omission of phrase pair “D” from the second strophe has tonal significance as well, since the phrase pair’s unique B-major (subdominant) orientation is thus confined to the first strophe.²¹ The resultant dissimilar

²¹It is clear from photograph 6 that Desdemona’s vocal line at the end of the second strophe’s phrase pair “B” (m. 143; “e la sua voce dicea così:”) originally concluded with a g \sharp ¹. Verdi’s decision to substitute a b¹ for the final pitch may indicate his desire to introduce a suggestion of the B-major tonality of phrase pair “D” into the second strophe.

Table 3
Music versions of the "Willow Song"

LINDA B.
FAIRTILE
Verdi's First
"Willow Song"

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- 1a. "Sotto ad un salice" —sketches, 1882–85? (NYPL photos 15 and 16)
 - 1b. "Sotto ad un salice"—continuity draft, 1882–85? (NYPL photos 3–7)
 - 2a. "Piangea cantando"—piano-vocal arrangement prepared by M. Saladino, September 1886
 - 2b. "Piangea cantando"—Verdi's corrections to 2a, September 1886
 - 2c. "Piangea cantando"—Verdi's changes made for R. Pantaleoni, October 1886
 - 2d. "Piangea cantando"—Verdi's changes made during rehearsals, January 1887
-

halves signify that this simple song, recalled from Desdemona's childhood, exhibits anything but a simple form, owing solely to a complication in its text. It is no wonder that Verdi sent Boito back to the drawing board.

As if emphatically to correct the formal problem of "Sotto ad un salice," the definitive "Willow Song," "Piangea cantando," contains an unmistakable refrain ("Cantiamo! cantiamo! il salce funebre sarà la mia ghirlanda"). The relationship between these two numbers, however, is closer than *Otello's* printed score suggests. While rehearsing the role of Desdemona with Romilda Pantaleoni in advance of the opera's 1887 premiere, Verdi wrote to Giulio Ricordi that, "I haven't [yet] decided with Pantaleoni what would be best in the two *refrains* [of "Piangea cantando"]."²² A manuscript piano-vocal arrangement of the opera's act IV, prepared by Michele Saladino for Casa Ricordi in September 1886, reveals that the original textual refrain after the second strophe of "Piangea cantando" (ex. 5) was set largely to another variation of the instrumental ritornello. Only after rehearsing with Pantaleoni did Verdi decide to make this textual refrain *musically* identical to the one following the first strophe.²³

In addition to their structural dissimilarities, the two versions of the "Willow Song" differ in their expressive representation of Desdemona. In "Sotto ad un salice," Desdemona's numbed, emotionless utterances seem to emanate from her dying soul. The song's brief phrases and subphrases, its high degree of musical repetition, and its constricted melodic range contribute to an atmosphere of exhaustion. Many vocal phrases rely on interlocking thirds and stepwise melodic cells, with the occasional addition of a sobbing grace note. Here Desdemona takes refuge in a song learned in childhood, and from this shelter she speaks with Barbara's voice, reproducing the servant's simple, repetitive phrases. Although the fragmentary nature of the draft's accompaniment says little about Verdi's intentions, it is likely that the orchestra's contribution would have been modest as well.

Verdi's second "Willow Song," "Piangea cantando," displays an extraordinarily more varied, more intense emotional palette. The range of expressive opportunities in this version of the song, from the plaintive "Salce, salce" to the musical descent of flying birds in the third strophe and the final, impassioned farewell to Emilia, gives the singer a wider musical and dramatic arc in which to depict her inexorably unraveling self-control.

Despite differences in text, character, and vocal setting, aspects of the meager, unfinished accompaniment to "Sotto ad un salice" reappear in "Piangea cantando." The instrumental

²²Verdi to Giulio Ricordi, 18 October 1886 (*Giuseppe Verdi-Giulio Ricordi: Corrispondenza e immagini 1881/1890*, ed. Franca Cella and Pierluigi Petrobelli [Milan, 1982], p. 51, cited and trans. Hepokoski, *Otello*, p. 66).

²³Hepokoski has described the "Saladino reduction" in *Otello*, pp. 64–68.

Can - tia - mo! Can - tia - mo! Il sal - ce fu - ne - bre sa - rà la mia ghir - lan - da.

Example 5 (reduction by Michele Saladino).

ritornello remains essentially the same in both songs, since its function as the transition between Desdemona's world and Barbara's does not change. It may be noted, however, that the two versions of the ritornello do differ slightly at their ends: although Verdi prepares Desdemona's vocal entrance in the earlier setting with a measure of silence, in the later one he introduces a sustained F# in the piccolo and English horn. This device may, in turn, have been suggested by details in the earlier song: the oboe's entrance above the voice in mm. 63–64 (ex. 3, "sede la mesta") and the sustained F# octave in mm. 204–06, just before Desdemona's final "buona notte." The instrumental conclusions of both songs are also similar, from the last statement of the ritornello through the final F#-major triad, although in "Sotto ad un salice" Verdi stretched the final instrumental cadence to a length of five measures by repeating a $\frac{5}{3}$ – $\frac{6}{4}$ alternation over the tonic bass. This extended cadence may serve the same dramatic function as the published version's sixteen-measure modulation that links the conclusion of Desdemona's "Ah! Emilia addio" to the first chord of the "Ave Maria." In both cases, welcome space is created between the end of one vocal expression and the beginning of another.

THE "AVE MARIA"

In the NYPL photographs, the "Ave Maria" immediately follows the final F#-major cadence of "Sotto ad un salice." Both Desdemona's anguished farewell to Emilia ("Ah! Emilia addio") and the transitional passage that establishes the new tonality of her prayer are absent from Verdi's original conception of *Otello's* act IV. And indeed, it certainly seems as if the great emotional release of the published version's "Ah! Emilia addio" would have been superfluous after the modest "Sotto ad un salice." Similarly, a modulation from the F#-major conclusion of "Sotto" was unnecessary because Verdi's first draft of the "Ave Maria" is in A major (that is, the more normal III of F# minor) rather than A \flat major. The "Ave Maria" is also represented in the NYPL photographs by multiple renderings. Photographs 8–10 transmit an early draft of the complete prayer, featuring an unfamiliar, discarded melody. Photograph 11, whose readings more closely resemble the published version, contains only the revised, cantabile portion. Although Verdi notated the revised "Ave Maria" draft (photograph 11) in the key of A major, in the first measure of the earlier draft—the only one to include the prayer's open-



Example 6: Photograph 8

ing phrases—he later crossed out the three-sharp signature in the accompaniment staff and replaced it with four flats. He also notated nine measures of virtually identical accompanimental material, this time in the key of A \flat major, directly below the first accompaniment staff. Thus photograph 8 transmits a portion of the “Ave Maria” in two keys.²⁴

Both the vocal line and the accompaniment in photographs 8–10 have been reworked, and it is clear that Desdemona’s opening monotone, which might seem so appropriate as to render another approach unimaginable, was not the only setting that Verdi considered. At one point, Desdemona began the prayer on a low e¹, leaping into her middle register at “sia benedetta il frutto” (blessed is the fruit [of thy womb]). A likely reason for abandoning this setting seems obvious enough: Boito’s text combines a vernacular version of the Latin “Ave Maria” with Desdemona’s personal petitions, and a premature switch from devotional murmuring to expressive singing obscures this distinction.

The original cantabile melody of the early “Ave Maria” draft (“Prega per chi adorando a te si prostra”) differs markedly from the final, familiar version, except for the text and portions of the instrumental postlude.²⁵ The most distinctive feature of the vocal melody is its open-

ing gesture (ex. 6): a lower-neighbor figure embellishes the initial, prolonged b¹ (2nd of A major) before leaping up to a sustained e² (5th) and descending by step. This motive, or a variation of it, returns with every instance of the word “prega,” causing the musical structure to mirror the irregular, repetitive text. For the later draft in photograph 11, as well as for the published score, Verdi eliminated the ornament, compressed the first two vocal measures into one, and fashioned a theme out of the elements of the tonic triad. This motive is independent of any specific text, so that the new setting exhibited the more symmetrical musical structure of AABA plus coda (the standard Italian “lyric form”). The later draft of the “Ave Maria” (in A major), however, still contains vestiges of the original’s characteristic chromatic embellishment: the phrase “per l’innocente” commences with a semitone motion from a^{#1} to b¹ (#1–2nd), rather than the a^{b1} to b^{b1} (b¹–2nd) of the published score, and concludes by sliding from b¹ to b^{#1} (2nd–#2nd) to prepare the following phrase’s c^{#2}.

The two “Ave Maria” drafts establish that, although Verdi changed the piece’s tonality, melody, accompaniment, and internal form, certain of its expressive features remained the same. Desdemona may not always murmur the vernacular prayer in the earlier draft, but the adoption of a regular melody with a running sixteenth-note accompaniment at the cantabile section (ex. 6) indicates a clear change of musical character. Similarly, the conclusions of the two drafts are based on an identical formula: after repeating the opening instrumental motive, the accompaniment continues with the melody of Desdemona’s penultimate phrase as she again intones the original prayer.

²⁴Despite the clarity of the photographed image, this page’s overwritten notes and accidentals, as well as its lack of clefs, make it the most difficult portion of the continuity draft to read.

²⁵The texts of both “Ave Maria” drafts differ from the final version in one respect: the drafts’ “e pel misero oppresso e pel possente, misero anch’esso” (and for the wretched oppressed and for the powerful, wretched also) became “e pel debole oppresso e pel possente, misero anch’esso” (and for the weak oppressed).

The NYPL photographs demonstrate—if proof is needed—that Verdi worked hard to compose *Otello*, his twenty-fifth opera. Detailed refinements of the act IV opening *scena* and the “Ave Maria” took place over an extended period of time. For the original “Willow Song,” however, an intractable text led to the rejection of a largely completed musical number. The fact that both “Piangea cantando” and the first version of the “Sotto ad un salice” text—not to mention the Willow Songs of Shakespeare, François-Victor Hugo’s anonymous English balladeer, and especially Rossini, whose own *Otello* (1816) had set the operatic standard—take the form of a strophic song with refrain suggests that Boito had always intended to write a piece of this type for Desdemona.

Although it may be tempting to dismiss

“Sotto ad un salice” as an inferior precursor to “Piangea cantando,” the two songs represent viable alternative interpretations of Desdemona’s inner state. While the definitive “Willow Song” is a study in tightly checked emotion, the earlier setting presents a woman so psychologically defeated that her recollection of a servant’s simple song becomes a profound communication. Verdi’s renunciation of “Sotto ad un salice” appears to have been structurally motivated; the complicated construction of Boito’s text confounded the modest, symmetrical musical setting that Verdi had planned to accommodate it. When he received a new text that did not undermine his formal requirements, Verdi was inspired to produce the musical and dramatic marvel that is the “second” “Willow Song,” “Piangea cantando.”

